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Literature, Culture and Language Learning

In the teaching of modern European languages such as German and English, there has been renewed interest in engaging with foreign language (FL) literature in order to develop knowledge of the culture in which the text is located and to raise awareness of intercultural attitudes, values and beliefs. However, there has been a reluctance to correspondingly reconsider theories of reading and literary interpretation. In pedagogic textbooks, reading is still theorised almost exclusively in terms of cognitive or psycholinguistic approaches, especially »exemplar models« such as schema theory (Barsalou 2003, 517–519). Although less widely promulgated, approaches derived from hermeneutics and phenomenology such as reader response theory (Iser 1974; 1978; 1989; 2006) have also been used to describe the reading of FL literature.

While there are similarities between exemplar models and reader response theory – for example, they are *modular* in their architecture, *amodal* in their systems of representation and are *situated* rather than abstract systems (after Barsalou 2003), there are also crucial differences. First, exemplar models are *taxonomic* in their organisational principles since they employ a hierarchical conceptual framework. By contrast, response theory exhibits a synthetic, *linear* organisation whereby the meaning of the text is produced through an imaginative engagement with the signifiers of the text itself. Second, the structure of textual comprehension in exemplar models is *paradigmatic*. Higher level schemata search for evidence of fit from lower level schemata and so on, down to the lowest level of sensory data. By contrast, the synthesis of narrative in response theory is *syntagmatic*. As the reader progresses through the narrative, his/her consciousness flows from one perspective to the next: just as the present ›horizon‹ is made up of ›themes‹ that have preceded the one with which the reader is currently engaged, so the present theme will become subsumed into an emerging horizon. Third, the ontology of exemplar models is *dualist*. In positing a mental structuration of knowledge which precedes comprehension of the text, exemplar models are predicated on an empirical reality that exists independent of the mind. By contrast, the ontology of response theory is *monist* in as much as an imaginary object of the literary text does not have an exterior existence, but rather the reader is given over to the text through subsequent phases of reading in a way which transcends the subject/object dichotomy. Fourth, exemplar models are relatively *stable*. The same set of exemplars is available to the reader to be applied consistently in every instance of comprehension. By contrast, response theory is *dynamic*, since it suggests that each moment of reading entails a transformation of the reader's experience and his/her perceptions of the cultural milieu from which the text has arisen.

This paper therefore argues that the two theories are indeed incommensurable and, furthermore, exemplar models appear less adequate for the description of features of FL literary texts. Not only do they fail to distinguish between denotative and connotative texts, but they also fall short of offering an account of the specific aesthetic and affective effects of a literary text. Finally, reader response theory serves to legitimate a diversity of interpretations by readers from heterogeneous cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

However, it is Wolfgang Iser's (1978; 1989) description of negation, blanks and negativity that is particularly applicable to reading FL literature, particularly with respect to its capacity to describe the generation of (inter)cultural meanings. First, through heightening the reader's awareness, negation enables him/her to problemize the normative system of mores encountered in the text. Negation produces a dislocation between the familiar and the unfamiliar through which the reader can generate an emergent transitional space which constitutes the meaning of the text. Second, as the reader progresses through the text, s/he continually switches from a segment which represents one point of view to another which represents a different perspective. During this process, gaps emerge which give rise to an indeterminacy of meaning and necessitate acts of ideation on the part of the reader in order to connect the different segments. Third, blanks suspend the as-yet-unformulated connections between the different perspectives in the text so that the reader transforms them into reciprocal projections. The connections that then emerge between these perspectives enable the reader to produce a determinate relationship between each segment which gives rise to an aesthetic effect.

Negation and blanks thus constitute a ›double‹ of the text, or negativity. Negativity problematizes the reader's prior assumptions through realizing the failure and deformation of human endeavour, thus impelling the creation of an as-yet-unformulated idea as to their origin; it also generates the unfamiliar elements in the text through the removal of external conditions from their real context. It is this conceptualisation of reading in terms of the aesthetic and potentially transformative experience of negativity that renders a phenomenological description of reading particularly applicable to the ›intercultural reader‹ who engages with FL literary texts.

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